



Political and
Geostrategic
OBSERVATORY
of the United States

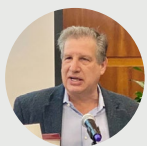
AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY AFTER THE ELECTION

Gideon Rose / Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations

June 2024



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gideon Rose / Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations

Gideon Rose was the editor of Foreign Affairs from 2010 to 2021 and is an Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Holding a Ph.D. from Harvard University, he also worked as an advisor at the United States National Security Council. An influential author and commentator, Rose is internationally recognized for his analyses on American foreign policy and global affairs.

PRESENTATION OF THE POLITICAL AND GEOSTRATEGIC OBSERVATORY OF THE UNITED STATES

Under the direction of Romuald Sciora, Associate Research Fellow at IRIS, the IRIS Political and Geostrategic Observatory of the United States aims to shed light on the presidential and legislative elections of 2024 and on developments in the contemporary United States, in particular their impact on Franco-American cooperation, the European Union and the rest of the world.

It publishes analyses, co-publishes reference works, produces videos and organises events (conferences, round tables, symposia) in France, the United States and Canada.

The **Academy of Political Science**, founded by Columbia University in New York, the **Columbia-SIPA Urban and Social Policy Program** and the **Raoul-Dandurand Chair in Strategic and Diplomatic Studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal**, are the Observatoire's main academic partners.

iris-france.org



@InstitutIRIS



@InstitutIRIS



institut_iris



IRIS



IRIS - Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques

Every four years, one hears predictions that the next presidential election will mark a decisive turning point in American foreign policy. This time it might actually be true. If Joe Biden wins in November, the forecast is easy: more of the same. A second Biden administration would continue on the same course as the first. There would be changes in personnel but not purpose. The administration would try to shore up what's left of the liberal international order and respond to growing security challenges from Russia and China, while continuing the neomercantilism that now has bipartisan support in Washington.

If Donald Trump wins, however, and especially if he wins along with Republican control of both houses of Congress, all bets are off. The American president has extraordinary powers in the sphere of foreign policy, and Trump has extraordinary powers among Republicans, so the range of possible outcomes is wide. Trump enjoys making shocking promises of vengeance and havoc, and if he lives up to his extreme rhetoric, there could be dramatic changes in many areas. How much he will disrupt things, however, remains impossible to predict.

On the one hand, Trump is a right-wing populist with long-held, deeply rooted neoisolationist views. He has four years of experience in the White House and should be more confident the second time around. Another Trump administration would therefore likely build on the track record of the first, while trying to erase all vestiges of the Biden interregnum. There would be economic nationalism. There would be a desire to reduce existing foreign military commitments and little taste for acquiring new ones. There would be skepticism about multilateral efforts to address global issues such as public health and climate change. And there would be rivalry with China.

Trump himself, however, is one of those singular individuals in history who shapes his environment rather than simply reflecting it. He acts boldly according to his own self-interested logic, which rarely matches what anybody else would do in a similar situation. And he is emotionally immature and volatile—so much so that a serious scholar wrote a good book about his first term titled *The Toddler in Chief*¹. All this makes his actions hard to forecast.

Take Ukraine, for example. Trump clearly has a soft spot for Vladimir Putin, no love for Ukraine, and little concern for European security or alliance politics. He mulled taking the United States out of NATO during his first term, and with a new cast of enabling sycophants around him in a second, this time he might be tempted to do it. Still, Trump loves to appear a winner and hates

¹ Daniel W. Drezner, *The Toddler in Chief -What Donald Trump Teaches Us about the Modern Presidency*, (The University of Chicago Press : 2020).

to appear a loser. Allowing Ukraine to succumb to Russian aggression on his watch would ensure a huge permanent hit to Trump's reputation, something he would be loath to accept. Trump will almost certainly explore the possibility of forcing Kyiv into a compromise peace. But should that prove impossible to negotiate, he might well pivot, and settle for supporting minimal Ukrainian resistance while crowing about extorting further defense commitments from Europe.

Something similar might be true for the liberal order more generally. Trump has a transactional, zero-sum view of life and foreign policy is no exception. He does not care about the interests or concerns of others except insofar as they affect him. This means he won't be driven by any sort of principles, norms, or collective goods. But it also means he has no larger vision or plan, nothing to put in place of the existing international framework. So, the result will likely be drift and decay, rot rather than revolution. The United States under Trump will do little to arrest trends toward democratic regression and international disorder. But nor is it likely to launch sustained, effective international initiatives of its own, for better or worse. There will be more talk than action.

In a best-case scenario, a second Trump term would see a rebuilding of the American defense industrial base combined with a prudent avoidance of actual conflict. But the president's personal qualities might get in the way of either. And the greatest unknown is how he would respond to a major crisis. The odds of some strange outcome far outside the bounds of normal practice are low. But with Trump, they cannot be discounted entirely.

Strategic expertise in complete independance



2 bis, rue Mercœur - 75011 PARIS / France

+ 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 60

contact@iris-france.org

iris-france.org



IRIS is one of the main French think tanks specialising in geopolitical and strategic issues. It is the only one to have the singularity of combining a research centre and a teaching centre delivering diplomas, via its IRIS Sup' school, a model that contributes to its national and international attractiveness.

IRIS is organised around four areas of activity: research, publication, training and event organisation.